

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Putting water back on the table

Israel, now with a water surplus, can take a regional lead, but not till it settles the issues with the Palestinians

By [Gidon Bromberg](#) and [Oded Eran](#) March 22, 2016, 2:06 pm

The 2015 Global Risks Report of the World Economic Forum has identified water issues, from drought to polluted water, as the biggest threat facing the planet over the next decade. And nowhere on the globe does the water crisis pose greater political risk than in the Middle East. This is a region where water scarcity is most severe and where the implications of failure to deal with the crisis can rapidly lead to greater suffering, regional instability and war.

A doomsday scenario can be avoided. Israel is the only country in the Middle East that has overcome water scarcity, combining conservation, desalination and wastewater reuse for large-scale agricultural production. The result: Israel has excess water for the first time in its history. It now has an opportunity to take regional leadership in the water sector that can also have far reaching political ramifications for the region.

But cooperation on water issues between Arab states and Israel will remain marginal as long as water issues themselves continue as a point of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

For the past 22 years, since signing the Oslo Accords, all Israeli and Palestinian governments have remained glued to an all-or-nothing approach, preventing any progress on any final status issue unless progress is made on all final status issues. It is no wonder that the general public on both sides have lost faith in peace. For two decades they have watched their leaders fail to produce any real progress towards peace.

Unlike the Oslo Accords' other final status issues, water issues can be solved today. Meeting the water needs of both sides is no longer a zero sum game.

Israel must break out of its all-or-nothing mindset, and forge a strategy that enables moving forward on solving what can be solved now as a way to build trust towards solving other final status issues. An agreement to share water more fairly between Israelis and Palestinians, achievable today, must not be held hostage to reaching a broad settlement in the future. Water should not be viewed as a bargaining chip for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Next month, on April 19th in Brussels, an opportunity exists to take a small step towards rebuilding faith. What better way to do that than following World Water Day initiate bilateral Israeli-Palestinian talks for the advancement of a shared Israeli / Palestinian water agreement. The April 19th opportunity is the little known meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) on Palestine that brings together every 6 months the Israeli and Palestinian governments together with the key players in the international community for discussions.

Towards the Brussels meeting, chaired by the Government of Norway, EcoPeace Middle East, a regional environmental organization, Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian and the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), a leading Israeli security think tank, have issued a set of water related recommendations suggested to be tabled for discussion.

These include doubling the amount of potable water Israel sells to Gaza; providing more water to the thirstiest towns in the West Bank, based on full utilization of a new water pipeline built by US taxpayers; and provision of the electricity needed to inaugurate a new World Bank led wastewater treatment plant in Gaza, that would stop the current release daily of 30 million liters of raw sewage polluting the Palestinian and Israeli coastline and help avoid the outbreak of pandemic diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Like no other issue, tangible progress made on water and sanitation can improve the lives of every Palestinian and Israeli, presently touched only by conflict. On this World Water Day, advancing on Israeli Palestinian water issues can help restore faith by improving people's lives and lead to the type of cooperation needed in the Middle East that can reduce one of the greatest threats facing the region and the planet, the global water crises.

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